



0 1620 0333 2549

POLAR
PAM
2695
POLA

The First Oil - Rush North

The Epic of Theo Link's Discovery Well at Fort
Norman and the First Aeroplanes to
Invade the Sub-Arctic

By

PHILLIP H. GODSELL, F.R.G.S., F.R.E.S.

"OIL" WINTER ISSUE 1954-55

Twice yearly \$2.00 a copy



Former Inspecting Officer for the Hudson's Bay Company and author of *Arctic Trader*, *The Romance of the Alaska Highway*, *The Vanishing Frontier*, etc.; Member of the Explorers Club, New York, who took part in the oil rush and staked oil-claims at Fort Norman.

IT WAS late in March, 1921, when I returned from Fort Good Hope after an inspection of the Hudson's Bay Company's posts along the Mackenzie River and my Chipewyan-Cree guide, John Robillard, drove my dog-drawn carriage into the snow-filled courtyard of Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories. Dog-team travel would soon be over and the long "in-between" season would set in until, with the opening of navigation some time in July, the SS. Mackenzie River would link us once again with the outside world, bringing belated mail, provisions, and trade supplies. Word had reached us that Sergeant "Nitchie" Thorne of the local Mounted Police detachment had delivered his prisoner, Albert Lebeaux—accused of murdering a squaw—to Inspector Fletcher at Fort Fitzgerald and had gone on south to Edmonton by dog-team. There would be no chance for him to return with mail until July when the ice would have cleared from Great Slave Lake. We settled down for the long and tiresome wait ahead.

A couple of days later, on March 28, there arose a sudden outburst of excited cries and into the trading store hurled a crowd of frightened Indians. "The Thunder Bird! The Thunder Bird!" they cried, their coppery faces pale beneath the tan of the spring sun. We spilled into the courtyard, wondering what the row was all about.

"The Thunder Bird!" shrieked another frightened native as he pointed a trembling finger to the sky.

There, to our amazement, were two glittering aeroplanes zooming in a wide circle far overhead. Not a soul in Fort Simpson had ever seen an airplane. Now they looked with increasing wonderment at these two mechanical monsters preparing to make a landing.

As the Junkers zoomed down from the skies dark figures tumbled from the Indian cabins. Here, indeed, was the awesome Thunder Bird in person, the holy bird that sits aloft on the highest mountains hatching out the lightning, and making the thunder with the drumming of its wings. Yes! here it was—roaring down menacingly, its huge "eyes" flashing in the sunlight. It was altogether too much! With a hoarse croak of fear old Chipewyan, the medicine man, plunged back into his cabin, snatched up a muzzle-loader and dashed outside just in time to take a flying shot at the foremost plane ere it straightened out and swerved toward him. Throwing away his gun, he dashed headlong for the

protecting woods, a score of terror-stricken bucks and squaws at his heels.

Gliding over the roofs of the Mission building the foremost Junkers alighted gracefully upon the snow. The skis commenced to skim the drifted surface. The weight settled down upon them. For a brief moment the plane rocked, as though tossed upon billowing waves, then sprawled forward, swayed from side to side, and nose-dived into the drifts. There was a sound of rending metal accompanied by a cascade of glittering crystal—then the door flew open and three kicking, sprawling humans landed, head first, in the snow. To the utter astonishment of all around there emerged from the smother the surprised face and lanky form of Sergeant Thorne. Staggering to his feet, he brushed the snow from his clothing and turned to look into the amazed eyes of his wife.

The other machine, piloted by Elmer Fullerton, noted the mishap, circled, and alighted without any trouble in the nearby snye. Captain Gorman, pilot of the first plane, swore lustily as he staggered through the drifts toward the damaged machine which lay like a sick bird upon the snow. A hasty examination showed that the prop was completely shattered, the undercarriage wrecked and the wing-tip damaged.

Back at my headquarters at the Hudson's Bay fort we learned from Gorman the circumstances that had led to the Sergeant's serio-comic return. The previous summer Theo Link had located the "Discovery Well" on Bear Island in the Mackenzie, fifty miles below Fort Norman. To anticipate the rush of stakers expected to overrun the region at open water, Charlie Taylor, manager of Imperial Oil in Edmonton, had persuaded his head office to purchase these two planes. Engaged to pilot the two newly-acquired 175 hp, all-metal Junkers from New York to Edmonton, Captain "Wop" May and Captain Gorman, accompanied by engineer Pete Derbyshire, had entrained for New York in November, 1920, and left New York in January, '21, wing their way across the continent in a tough, cold flight; May's machine bearing the Canadian registration G-CADP, and Gorman's G-CADQ. Poor visibility and icing forced Gorman down at Brandon, where his craft sustained sufficient damage to delay him there several weeks. Meanwhile, "Wop" May reached Edmonton,



Fullerton's machine, G-CADP, being repaired and readied for the 'last chance' dash back to civilization after the crash of Gorman's plane.

through terrible weather, at nightfall on January 5th, 1921. Here he severed his connection with the enterprise to carry on an airplane venture of his own and Elmer G. Fullerton was engaged, with William Hill as mechanic, to take over "Wop's" plane. The machines were flown north to Peace River Crossing where a landing site, hangar and living quarters were established, engines given a thorough overhaul, wheels replaced with skis, and an advance fuel cache established at Hay River post. All was now ready for the projected flight to Fort Norman.

It was at this point that Sergeant "Nitchie" Thorne, having just completed his eight weeks dog-team trek from Fort Simpson, ran across Captain Gorman in Edmonton. Could the Sergeant, Gorman asked, give him some information concerning ice conditions and prospective landing places, in the North? The Sergeant did. Then, the thought occurred to Thorne that to return home in eight hours over a route that ordinarily took eight long weeks by snowshoe and dog-team would be accomplishing something unusual and spectacular. The deal was closed, and the Sergeant proceeded north beside Gorman in the cockpit of the first air-patrol in the history of the Mounted Police while another passenger, Dominion Land Surveyor W. Waddell, accompanied Elmer Fullerton.

There was just a touch of the dramatic in the Sergeant's make-up and he had had reasons of his own for pointing out that mission field to Gorman as a prospective landing place instead of the nearby channel between the island and the mainland. Beside the field were the red-roofed buildings of his barracks; and it would be quite a joke to make a grandstand landing at the back door, before his wife!

With "DQ" out of commission it was decided that Fullerton, accompanied by Waddell and Hill, should complete the 350-mile flight to Fort Norman the following day. Since, however, Fullerton's machine had developed engine trouble, his propeller and one of his skis were fitted to the damaged plane and the wing-tip straightened. Next morning, with Hill, Waddell and equipment aboard "DQ" Gorman proceeded to take off. But ill-luck continued to dog him. As the machine sped forward it rocked, nose-dived, and the second propeller was also shattered to atoms.

Dolefully, they made their way back to the post, Gorman striding like a caged lion up and down the mess-room, his future plans completely shot by the double disaster. Here they were, he raved, marooned in the wilderness with not a chance to get out until the river steamer called on its up-river trip late in July. If they could only get another prop! But the nearest telegraph office was nearly a thousand miles to the southward—there were no radios in those days—while dog-team travel was out of the question as the ice was getting bad. Disconsolately they made their way to the mission and hired a cabin from Father Decoux.

Around the Carron stove in the Company's mess-room that evening the airplanes became the sole topic of conversation between Fred Camsell, the factor, Walter Johnson and others, the rather doubtful performance of these machines having convinced them that you couldn't beat the time-worn canoe and dog-team. To these Northerners the airplane was just another of those "contraptions" which, while they might have their place in the effete "Outside" beyond the frontier, had no place in the North. The fact that Thorne had actually accomplished in eight hours a journey that usually occupied eight weeks of soul-searing toil meant just exactly nothing since the party was now marooned by the failure of their machines.



Godsell, at right, with Indian helpers travelling the hard way, while staking oil claims at Fort Norman in the Winter of '21.

There was, however, one dissenting voice. It was that of Walter Johnson, general handyman around the post and, in the summer time, engineer aboard the diminutive Laird River, who, years before, had been an expert cabinetmaker.

Until the small hours of the morning Gorman and I talked the situation over. "Wouldn't it be possible," I suggested, "to make another propeller?"

"I don't think," Walter interjected, "It should be so damned hard to make one after all!"

Fred Camsell chuckled. Elmer Fullerton laughed outright, but Walter was not to be deterred. Fixing them with a baleful stare he grunted: "I've never seen a woodworking job I couldn't handle yet!"

Next morning I persuaded Gorman to accompany Walter and myself to the scene of the mishap where Walter examined the broken props minutely. Each was composed of nine laminated strips of black walnut glued into a solid block, cut to shape by the most accurate machinery, then finished off by trained workmen and tipped with copper.

"Well, Walter," I queried, "what's your verdict?"

"I dunno," he gave me a long, reflective look, "I still believe I could make one—if only I had the proper kind of wood!"

"How about using those oak sleigh-boards I had shipped in last fall to make a dog-carriage with?" I suggested. "They're all straight-grained for I selected them myself, and we've lots of moose parchments in the fur loft that could be boiled down into glue."

Gorman shook his head, though I noticed that Walter was intrigued with my suggestion. Examining the pitch of the propeller he took some measurements. "How about letting me off for a few days?" he asked. "I'd like to see what I can do."

"Go to it," I said. "Take all the time you like."

To the aviators the idea of a sleigh-board, moose-glue prop seemed ridiculous. Only Hill, Gorman's mechanic, greeted the suggestion with the faintest display of grudging enthusiasm.

A few steamer clamps, an auger, a ship's adze, axes, chisels, planes and crooked knives were the only tools available yet, quite undaunted, Walter went ahead. Day by day he sawed and chipped at the toboggan boards. With Hill's assistance numerous templates of tin were cut to shape, using one unbroken blade as a guide. Gradually the home-made propeller assumed the regulation form and shape. But would it, when completed, be capable of standing a strain of fifteen hundred revolutions per minute from an 175

her engine? And—would it be capable of driving a machine weighing two tons through the air at a speed of ninety miles an hour? Walter, still optimistic, swore it would. Everybody else was either skeptical or downright unbelieving.

Meanwhile Fullerton, Derbyshire and Waddell had overhauled "DP's" motor and repaired the damaged skis; the first aircraft repair job ever undertaken in the North. On April 15, Fullerton adjusted the scarlet-painted moose-glued sleigh-board prop to G-CADP and climbed into the cockpit. Slowly he opened the throttle until the Junkers was struggling at the restraining ropes and the new prop swirling fine clouds of snow into the air. With a grim nod he signalled to us to release the ropes. Again the engine barked out its full power, the staccato detonations from the exhaust shattering the sub-Arctic stillness. Nervously we watched it roar away, partly obscured by the flying mist of snow, until it appeared in full flight above the sentinel pines.

We stood there breathless, watching Fullerton circling for altitude, the sunlight flashing and glinting from the home-made blur in front of the nose. The cadence of its revolutions came down to us in a rising and falling rhythm of sound. Would the prop suddenly disintegrate and send both ship and pilot crashing to the frozen earth? I looked at Gorman. Pale and tense, he stood there, his knuckles white as he watched the Junkers soar in ever-widening circles.

For nearly an hour Fullerton put the ship through her paces. Nervous at first, Walter grinned delightedly as the smooth rhythm of the sleigh-board prop continued to purr down from a height of 2,000 feet, or more.

At last the Junkers circled and skimmed in for a landing, not on the bumpy mission field, but on the level ice of the snye behind the fort. Fullerton was exultant; the new prop had responded as though it had been turned out on a factory lathe!

I had repeatedly warned Captain Gorman that Indians reported the prospect of an early break-up of the Liard River. Lulled, however, into a sense of false security by Sergeant Thorne's assurance that the Liard never went out until the month of May, it was not till eight days had elapsed that preparations were completed for the takeoff for Peace River Crossing, four hundred miles to the southwest. Already the Liard was showing ominous signs of breaking up; the ice was getting black in spots, and there were distant and ominous rumblings. Meanwhile the ship had been staked out behind the island where the Liard and Mackenzie meet.

Their preparations at last completed, Gorman and Fullerton crawled into their blankets at the barracks, prepared for a good night's rest. At five next morning we were awakened at the post by an unholy racket downstairs. Rushing down we found Henry Lafferty there in a state of wild excitement. "De Liard Ribber, he's goin' out," he cried. "De ice—he's pilin' up . . . De water's risin' fast!"

Ominous news indeed! When the swift-flowing Liard River broke up and hurled its mighty force against the still solid ice of the Mackenzie, it was one of the sights of the North, since it was no unusual thing for the river to rise twenty feet in as many minutes, while the impact of the crushing, grinding ice against the barrier of the Mackenzie was terrific. Tearing down to the barracks we surprised Gorman and his mechanic in bed, awakened them, and all streaked down through the bush to see if the plane was still

there or had already been demolished. It was intact, but only about 400 feet of solid ice remained for a take-off, while a foot of muddy water was already swirling above the skis.

With desperate haste we piled the stuff aboard as Fullerton feverishly warmed up the engine. Any moment now might see the barrier break and witness the complete demolition of the plane. Higher and higher crept the turgid flood. Shorter and shorter became the runway. We could hear the deafening roar of the ice as it piled remorselessly into the mouth of the channel.

"Load's too heavy!" Fullerton started pitching the baggage ashore. "I'll have to go alone. Bring that stuff out to the little lake just west of here. I'll wait there for you."

Next moment he'd given her the gun and was streaking down the snye. To us it seemed that the plane would never rise. She cleared the ice barrier by inches. Her skis struck open water, sending aloft a shower of glittering spray. Gorman groaned. A slip-up now spelled certain death. Beneath the ship surged thousands of tons of grinding, roaring ice. Suddenly the plane commenced to climb! We could see a thin blue line of sky between her and the rising mass of hurtling ice. There arose a choking gasp of relief. She circled, and disappeared above the spiked pines to the westward.

"Look!" cried Walter.

At the foot of the bank, where the ship had been resting but a few brief moments before, roared a mighty brown flood, tossing in its grip enormous masses of ice as though they were mere snowballs. We turned and retraced our way to the fort.

Late that evening, when the channel cleared, we ferried Gorman, the two mechanics, and Jack Cameron as guide, across in a canoe and watched them climb the wooded bank with the baggage on their backs. Walter decided to accompany them as far as the little lake where Fullerton intended to set down the plane on solid ice. Not till late the following day did Cameron and Walter return. They'd found the plane at the appointed spot. The boys had piled aboard and the ship, with its whirring sleigh-board prop, had disappeared, heading into the southwest.

From that time on we speculated and wondered. Had they succeeded in making Peace River Crossing? Or had they fallen in the unpopulated wilderness across which their route would lie, sacrificing their lives in attempting to introduce the airplane to a region which still looked upon the canoe and dog-sled as the only practicable modes of travel?

On July 5 the S.S. Mackenzie River churned into Fort Simpson with waving flags and fluttering pennants. Then, for the first time, we learned the outcome of that epic flight. The sleigh-board moose-glue prop had fulfilled Walter Johnson's brightest expectations. Four hours after leaving Fort Simpson Fullerton had set his ship down safely on the frozen surface of Bear Lake near the frontier settlement of Peace River. And, a few days later, the Hudson's Bay Company's head office in Winnipeg received the first air-mail from the North, which included my official report on Walter's miraculous feat—mail which I had handed Gorman on the eve of his departure and which, under ordinary circumstances, would not have reached civilization until late the following August.

[illegible][illegible]

Рс

PRINTED IN U.S.A.